

## Which American Dream Do You Mean?

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**Abstract** According to the latest U.S. Census projection, the arrival of immigrants and their higher birthrates, projected forward at current rates, will turn the U.S. into a “minority–majority” society in 2042, 8 years earlier than the Census used to predict. Liberals tend to view immigration to the U.S. as a human right, but many employers prefer to hire immigrants because they can be paid less than the cost of reproducing their labor—that is, the cost of keeping an American family above the poverty line. One way of looking at the resulting debates over U.S. immigration policy is in terms of moral economy, that is, how different factions compete for moral authority in order to gain control over a desired good. In this case, the desired good is American citizenship, including access to the highest consumption rates on the planet, and national definitions of citizenship are competing with transnational or globalist definitions of citizenship. Constructing moral rhetoric for either national or transnational definitions of citizenship requires excluding information that does not serve the cause. One way of spotlighting the omissions is to look at each moral economy as a highly selective version of the American Dream.

**Keywords** Comprehensive immigration reform · Census projection · Minority–majority

In his campaign for president, Barack Obama promised a comprehensive immigration reform that will probably include legalizing undocumented immigrants. So as we stumble out of the rubble of our credit collapse, activists

and talking heads will return to this contentious subject. In 2007, 38 million people or 12.6% of the U.S. population was foreign-born. According to the latest U.S. Census projection, the arrival of immigrants and their higher birthrates, projected forward at current rates, will turn the U.S. into a “minority–majority” society in 2042, 8 years earlier than the Census used to predict. That is, the percentage of people who we define as non-Hispanic whites (currently 65% of the population) will decline to less than 50% of the U.S. population. In 15 years people who we currently define as minorities will comprise more than half of all children, and by 2050 they will comprise 54% of the population.

Statistical trends such as these are quick to provoke indignation. Some Americans are horrified that, in 2008, the U.S. government forcibly deported 361,000 people, almost ninety percent of them Mexicans and Central Americans. The deportees include people who made their lives in the United States, and they have many relatives, friends and employers who feel their human rights have been violated. Other Americans are horrified that immigrants who deliberately broke the law, who did so repeatedly to smuggle in their relatives, and who may continue to do so, will be rewarded with citizenship. The relation between these two positions is that of a head-on collision. So a frequent reaction to the numbers and the issues they raise is to jump out of the way. Among the people jumping out of the way are many environmentalists and labor Democrats. Environmentalists are not overjoyed to see immigration driving the rapid growth of an American population that consumes more resources per capita than any other on the planet. Labor Democrats are not overjoyed to see employers gravitating to cheaper immigrant labor. But they often steer clear of the subject because they do not want to be accused of racism.

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There are many reasons why the U.S. immigration debate is loaded with shrill accusations, inhibition, and double-talk; one is that it splits liberals and conservatives down the middle. Liberals tend to view immigration to the U.S. as a human right, the idea of excluding anyone repels them, but many employers prefer to hire immigrants because they can be paid less than the cost of reproducing their labor—that is, the cost of keeping an American family above the poverty line. Hence the lure of non-citizens as ideal workers—not just to the kind of employers who own citrus groves and sweatshops, but to the kind of employers who rely on immigrants to raise their children as they write angry pro-amnesty editorials for the *New York Times*. Unfortunately, the social deficits created by not paying a living wage are either made up by taxpayers or they are not made up at all. This is why, even if many immigrants are hard workers who deserve a break, large low-wage migration streams undermine wage structures, social services and personal security. Certainly there are benefits, but these tend to be harvested by privileged social classes, with most of the costs borne by more vulnerable classes. Hence the perception of many middle and working-class Americans that large, low-wage migration streams threaten their way of life. Among both Republicans and Democrats, there is a divide between elites who welcome new immigration streams and ordinary voters who fear them. Both Republicans and Democrats try to exploit immigration as a wedge issue against the other, but this is a stratagem that can explode in their faces.

### The Long Conversation Shifts from Human Rights to Immigrant Rights

One way of listening to the immigration debate is that it is a “long conversation” that has come to include people from all over the world. When I showed up in a Mayan Indian town in Guatemala in the 1980s, I wanted to talk to people about political violence and reconstruction programs. Many Ixil Mayas were willing to help me, but there was another topic on their minds: *Cuanto se gana en los Estados Unidos?* What’s the pay in the U.S.? Could I help them go there and get a job? This was their dream, not mine, and I always said no. Eventually, without any help on my part, they figured out how to sneak into places like Ohio and Virginia, so now, every time I visit, we chew over the perils of this strategy for *superación* or getting ahead.

The conversation between myself and Guatemalans did not begin when I showed up in Guatemala and it does not stop when I leave, because it is just one chapter in a much longer conversation between North Americans and Guatemalans, that goes back more than a century and that will continue long after my interlocutors and I have departed this world. Each side has our preferred topics; Americans

prefer to talk about Mayan culture, Guatemalan history and human rights. Guatemalans prefer to talk about aid projects and getting the hell out of Guatemala.

The metaphor of the long conversation comes from the anthropologist Paul Sullivan. His book *Unfinished Conversations* explores the correspondence between Harvard archaeologists and Mayan peasants during the excavation of the Postclassic Mayan city of Chichen Itzá. Chichen Itzá is in the Yucatán Peninsula, in a region from which the Bush Mayas expelled white plantation owners in 1847 and set up their own independent territory. When Harvard archaeologists arrived 75 years later, they wanted the Mayas to cooperate with the excavation. What did Mayan leaders want in return? According to Sullivan’s analysis of the correspondence, they hoped the Harvard archaeologists would give them guns for another rebellion against the Mexican state. When the historian Nelson Reed showed up in the 1960s, village elders asked him for guns too.

The relation between the Mayas and the Americans was amicable but full of mutual misunderstanding and manipulation. What the two sides wanted from each other was very different. But what they were saying to each other was just the latest installment in a long conversation that goes back to the Spanish Conquest and that continues to this day, carried on by other people. Unlike a dialogue, which suggests working toward a common end and eventually reaching agreement, a long conversation is not likely to end in agreement because it has no foreseeable end. It has no foreseeable end because the two sides do not even want the same thing. You could call it a long argument instead, but because the two sides need each other it never breaks off. The people who started the conversation die, others take their place, and the discussion goes in new directions. In a strange and marvelous way, a conversation that began 500 years ago, and that used to revolve around European power and Christianity, has evolved into a conversation about human rights.

When you join these conversations in poor countries, you have to deal with the contrast between your own ability to cross national boundaries, legally and comfortably, and the inability of many of your interlocutors to do so. It is not fair. If we give you permission to visit our country, Guatemalans ask, why don’t you give us permission to visit the U.S.? This is a good question, for which a good answer is: I am not offering to work for their patrón for a lower wage than they do. Yet it remains a painful issue for anyone with friends or relatives who want to come to the U.S. Hundreds of millions of people around the world dream of earning higher wages here than they can at home. In Vermont many of us pride ourselves on our sympathy for people trapped in poor countries. Supporting generous immigration policies goes without saying. Since few of us make our living as human traffickers, immigration lawyers, or refugee counselors, we

do our bit by supporting human rights. But the more we talk about human rights, the more it becomes apparent that human rights will arrive in countries like Guatemala only slowly, if ever. And so Guatemalans ask, won't we have a better life in El Norte than we ever will in our own country? And so moving to a stable, wealthy country has become a powerful subtext in human rights. To return to the metaphor of the long conversation, this is the topic into which human rights has been morphing—immigrant rights.

### National Versus Global Definitions of Citizenship

Since many American employers have found reasons to prefer immigrant labor, and since the future of many American workers is anything but secure, American social scientists should be asking what, if any, obligations we have to our fellow American citizens. Do our obligations to them outweigh our obligations to all the people who want to join our labor markets? If your answer to this question is yes, you still probably define your citizenship in national terms. If your answer is no, you may be defining your citizenship in transnational terms—which would not be a surprise for intellectuals pursuing transnational careers. Yet what serves the purposes of globe-trotting professionals is not necessarily good for working people trading water in the treacherous cross-currents of global capitalism. Our waterpark could be their typhoon.

Once immigrants come to the U.S, they join another long conversation which has been going for centuries—is the United States a nation, of people who feel a special sense of obligation to each other through descent, marriage and patriotism, or is it a multinational society of people from very different backgrounds, who do not have much in common except our shared desire to enjoy lots of personal freedom and high levels of consumption? And so the immigration debate leads to touchy questions about citizenship, about who belongs and who does not.

Or is the question of who belongs so discriminatory that we should not even ask it? Why can't everyone belong? Our sense of moral obligation—and I'm stressing obligation, the felt duty to respond even at high cost to ourselves—depends on how narrowly or broadly we define our moral community—the people to whom we owe our highest loyalty, our obligations to whom trump our obligations to other people. Consider four alternatives:

1. The oldest form of moral community is to your family or clan or local residential group. For much of humanity, even at the start of the twenty-first century, this still trumps the other alternatives. Wherever states are unstable and unreliable, a very localistic definition of moral obligation is still the lifeboat. Even in the U.S.
2. A second way of defining moral community is in terms of ethnic nationalism. Ethnic nationalism would have us prioritize our membership in groups of people who claim common descent, but in much broader ways than traceable kinship. We now associate ethnic nationalism with tremendous destruction, but in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many intellectuals considered it a vast improvement over multinational empires ruled by monarchs. Garibaldi and other nineteenth-century romantics pulled together ethnic nationalism and republicanism into the conviction that they were fighting for all of humanity, not just their own nationalities.
 

The dangerous presumption in ethnic nationalism is that states should have a core nationality. In the words of Michael Ignatieff (1997:59), “what is wrong with nationalism is not the desire to be master in your own house, but the conviction that only people like yourself deserve to be in the house.” If every group has the right to be master in its own house, who defines the house appropriate to each group? Do the Israelis have the right to the West Bank because their ancestors occupied it 2,000 years ago? Do Mexicans have the right to occupy California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas because Mexico owned these territories 170 years ago? What if people who you define as guests decide that this is their house, not yours? Who decides who gets to be a national group?
3. Because ethnic nationalism has encouraged many such disagreements, which could combine with nuclear weapons to destroy us, many thinkers have argued for a third and broader way of defining moral community. Under civic nationalism, a constitution grants equal rights to everyone, regardless of national origin, so that what counts is your allegiance, not your national origin. Hence the cult of the American flag, of the Canadian maple leaf, of God Save the Queen, and liberty, equality and fraternity. Yet according to skeptics, civic nationalism continues to assume a core national group and becomes a façade for ethnic nationalists to claim they are no longer marginalizing minorities. Even if this is not the case, civic nationalism ends up justifying exclusion because the only way that it can define itself as a nation is to have outsiders, non-nationals, who may visit as guests but only with the state's permission. And so civic nationalism may be only an unstable variant of ethnic nationalism.
4. For those of us who do not want to exclude anyone, our fourth possible definition of moral community is

globalism, and with it globalist definitions of citizenship. Here it is important to distinguish between globalism as an empirical analysis of material and symbolic exchanges across national boundaries (often called transnationalism) and globalism as a political or moral project, which assumes that globalism should be encouraged because it leads to better social outcomes than nationalism. Many liberals presume that globalism is more tolerant and humane than nationalism because it is not exclusionary, at least at first sight. And so we keep faith with a long and honorable tradition in Western liberalism, which has extended legal equality to one subordinate group after another—to religious dissenters, to people without property, to females, and to subordinate ethnic groups. The only people who are still not equal are non-citizens.

But how well does globalism work as a definition of moral community, that is, as a moral obligation to people to whose aid we will come even if very expensive and inconvenient? Obligation is the necessary measure because warm feelings and impulses are not enough. Without obligation backed by family resources, or community resources, or tax dollars and state authority, we have the least commendable chapters in the history of the United Nations, or the sorry record of the U.S. and the European Community in stopping genocide in Yugoslavia and Equatorial Africa. Globalists like to think that we feel moral responsibility for the entire world, but globalism gives us so many victims from which to choose that we can cherry-pick the victims that most attract us, leaving many others in the lurch. The aid industry struggles with this problem under the heading of “compassion fatigue.” How do you keep up the interest of the global North in helping the global South survive one crisis after another? Bottom line—if you cannot renew your supply of appealing beneficiaries, the donations flow elsewhere. In the words of one of my students, globalism is flakey. It maximizes the number of people for whom we can take credit rhetorically while not obligating us to any of them in particular.

Could this be the very point of globalism, to minimize local obligations? Nationalism has served the interests of narrow minds, but globalism also serves narrow interests, such as corporate elites moving their capital to cheaper labor in the Third World, Third World intellectuals moving to endowed institutions in the West, and the trust-fund left drumming up moral authority for itself (Dirlik 1994). If the American nation is just a history of racial discrimination that needs to be transcended, then what claim do American workers have on American corporate elites, or on East and West Coast intellectuals who visualize themselves as heroes in the struggle against nativist bigotry? Human rights activists, foundation officers, international investors and

bureaucrats would like to believe that globalism is the march of history, but they often sound like apologists for market forces that were set in motion by entrepreneurs of one kind or another. The globe, the market, human rights all presumably work toward the greater good of all, yet the noble rhetoric has justified the dissolution of local obligations in spirals of debt and accumulation that suddenly collapse, leaving devastation in their wake.

Nationalism makes big promises, but globalism makes even bigger ones. Both national and transnational definitions of citizenship conceal tremendous hierarchies and power differentials, but transnationalism provides even fewer mechanisms for resisting them. Compared to the world system, as Timothy Brennan (2006:229–30) has pointed out, nation-states are not just imagined communities; they are relatively manageable communities, in which voters can vote the bums out of office and “draw a boundary between what is theirs and what is not theirs, between what is open to the outside and not open. In this latter, very seldom talked-about sense, the nation protects the weak and is their refuge.”

## Two Moral Economies and Their Dream Lives

And so the debate over U.S. immigration policy gets back to testy questions about citizenship, conflicting loyalties and self-interest. If American social scientists do not wish to sound like transnational elites, we should think about the difference between a moral economy revolving around national citizenship and one revolving around transnational citizenship. Moral economy is a way of looking at how different factions compete for moral authority in order to gain control over the allocation of a desired good. In this case, the desired good is the right to move from illegal to legal residency, culminating in American citizenship and providing access to the highest consumption rates on the planet. And by good I do mean a commodity, a legal commodity that is bought and sold like mineral rights. The Guatemalans I interview have each paid human traffickers \$5,000 to enter the United States. If successful, they loan money to relatives and neighbors so that they too can enter the U.S. If they can persuade an American citizen to marry them and bear their child, and if they can afford an immigration lawyer, they have a chance of legalizing themselves.

It is economic transactions such as this that fuel immigration to the U.S., and it is through moral economy that we can analyze how such transactions turn into moral and political debates, in which different factions use loaded symbols (e.g., the American flag, the Mexican border, crosses marking graves) to build moral authority for themselves. At immediate issue is who deserves the rights associated with legal residency and citizenship. Ultimately at stake are different

demographic futures. Immigrant-rights advocates believe they are defending the human rights of refugees and building a more tolerant America. Restrictionists believe they are protecting a middle-class society without huge gaps between rich and poor. In actuality, each side could be encouraging the opposite of what it intends—an America that is ever more stratified along class and ethnic lines.

Given our addiction to importing cheap foreign labor, constructing moral rhetoric for either national or transnational definitions of citizenship requires excluding information that does not serve the cause. One way of spotlighting the omissions is to look at each moral economy as a highly selective version of the American Dream—the invocation of which has long enabled Americans to avoid making unpleasant choices. What exactly is the American Dream? The core assumption is that, no matter how poor you start out, you can build a better life for yourself and your children. Thanks to television, the American Dream now enchants people all over the planet.

It is also extremely deceptive, as Sarah Mahler discovered in her research with Salvadoran and Peruvian immigrants. The only way they could achieve a modicum of stability, Mahler reported in *American Dreaming* (1995), was by monetizing their relationship with their relatives and exploiting other immigrants. Immigrants typically say they come to America to help their families yet many lose their families in the process. Immigrant-rights activists assume that any number of immigrants will benefit U.S. society, and that U.S. society will benefit those immigrants, but new waves of immigrants are undercutting the wages of earlier immigrants. Corporate elites claim that a rising tide will float all boats, but economic growth no longer translates into rising incomes for most Americans. Such paradoxes are less surprising once we recognize that American consumption levels are not just completely unsustainable; they are a potent form of addiction and the American Dream is a particularly entrancing form of commodity fetishism.

The American Dream originated as a marriage between capitalism and nationalism but it is now ending in divorce, as corporations find cheaper labor and more permissive tax havens outside the US. The children of the dream are obliged to choose sides. Some cling to nationalism—with its exclusionary national definition of citizenship—while others put their hopes in capitalism and transnational definitions of rights. Most immigrant-rights activists are very critical of market forces, but they accept employers' claims that the US economy needs lots of foreign labor. Unfortunately, the more low-skill immigrants arrive on American shores, the greater will be the oversupply of low-skill labor and the easier they will be to abuse. The more inequality develops in the American economy, the more impossible it is to provide the plenty and mobility that Americans have come to expect.

So let us look at each moral economy, one revolving around national citizenship and the other revolving around transnational citizenship, as a different version of the American Dream. By suggesting that each moral economy is a dream life, I do not mean to dismiss them as fantasies completely out of touch with reality. To the contrary, each derives credibility from its ability to provide satisfying explanations for everyday experience. But a dream does have to be very selective. If it included all the discordant details of existence, it would not be a dream. So each of these versions of the American Dream simplifies the world into a more pleasant place than it actually is, by justifying large rhetorical exclusions.

What then of the census projection that the U.S. will become a “minority–majority” society by 2042? Is this the result of inevitable economic and demographic forces, or is it the product of decision-making by American elites? How well or poorly is U.S. society and government functioning where it is already minority–majority, e.g. Hawaii, New Mexico, South Texas, California, New York City? If there is a range of outcomes, are the most critical variables economic? Are there any countries whose ethnic composition has changed at this pace without serious ethnic conflict? If there are such cases, what can we learn from them? Three decades from now, how significant will be our current dichotomies of White/Black Anglo/Latino, Hispanic/non-Hispanic? What dichotomies could replace them? Are there large benefits to Americans claiming to be a nation, that is, a single people through descent and marriage and civic loyalty? Or would we be better off if we agreed that we are actually a multinational society? I sense a lot of hesitation to ask questions like these.

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